The Benefits of Pilates
Just what can Pilates exercises do for you?

By Barbara Russi Sarnataro
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Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD

"I must be right. Never an aspirin. Never injured a day in my life. The whole country, the whole world, should be doing my exercises. They'd be happier."

-- Joseph Hubertus Pilates, in 1965, age 86.

Runner or golfer, tennis player or new mom, chances are you've heard someone talking about the benefits of Pilates. Many types of people, at many levels of fitness, who have begun doing Pilates exercises say they've seen improvements in range of motion, flexibility, circulation, posture, and abdominal strength -- and decreases in back, neck and joint pain.

Forty years after his death, the system of exercises developed by Joseph Pilates has never been in such demand. But can the benefits of Pilates (puh-LAH-teez), the system of strengthening and stretching exercises designed to develop the body's core, mobilize the spine and build flexibility, really be that far-reaching?

Pilates Benefit No. 1: Body Awareness

Celebrity Pilates teacher Siri Dharma Galliano says Pilates -- when performed correctly and with the proper supervision -- can do all that and more.

"It is an education in body awareness," says Galliano, who owns Live Art Pilates studio in Los Angeles. "It changes your shape by educating you in daily life. When you're cooking, brushing your teeth -- the lessons are coming home to pull your stomach in and pull your shoulders down. There is an attention required (in doing the exercises) that changes your awareness" even after class.

"It teaches you how to train your mind and build symmetry and coordination in the body," adds Galliano. "And when you can get control of the little things, that's practicing willpower."

Aliesa George, a Pilates teacher in Wichita, Kan., agrees.

"The biggest benefit in my eyes would be personal awareness -- awareness of how you sit or how you stand or how you move and being able to relate those habits to the aches and pains and injuries you have or have had in the past," she says.
For example, she says, it can help make you aware of that chronic tweak in the neck you get from sitting at the computer all day with rounded shoulders and a phone cradled between ear and shoulder.

As a Pilates-trained physical therapist, Dan Westerhold says he sees a lot of clients with injuries or weakness of the postural muscles, as a result of work, lifestyle, or not exercising the right way.

"People sit slouched at computers all day, then go to the gym and work their extremities," says Westerhold, of Pilates Seattle. "They don't use their core."

Think of a tree, Pilates experts say. Does it have all its strength in its limbs? No. The tree is only as strong as its trunk and roots. Without a strong trunk, the tree would topple over.

It's the same for human bodies, say Pilates experts. If we don't concentrate on building a good foundation and a strong trunk or core, we'll end up tight in some places and weak in others, injury-prone and susceptible to the pitfalls of our occupation or chosen form of exercise.

**Pilates Benefit No. 2: A Stronger Core**

But how about flattening the abs? Can Pilates exercises really give you a washboard stomach?

Experts warn that it's important not to equate a stronger core with a flatter stomach.

"When people want 'flat abs,' they are usually looking for weight loss, not abdominal strength and core support," says George. "More than touting the benefits of Pilates for flat abs, we should be touting the benefits of Pilates for a stronger, healthy back and body. If along the way, you do the other components of fitness and trim the body down, yes, you're going to have a flatter midsection."

As you develop body awareness, stand straighter, and gain flexibility, "Pilates will shift your shape," says Galliano. "But just attending a group mat class may or may not change your body."

Kevin Bowen, co-founder of the Pilates Method Alliance and director of special projects, says it is important that abdominals are flexible, not just hard.

"A flexible muscle is a strong muscle," says Bowen. "A hard muscle may feel good and give an interesting look, but if you don't have the flexibility and the balance and the functionality that you need to allow your body to function properly, sooner or later, it's going to show up someplace else."
Pilates Benefit No. 3: Body Control

Galliano, who has sculpted the bodies of Madonna, Cameron Diaz, Sting, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Uma Thurman, says Pilates works because it teaches you how to move.

"Unless you are taught how to move and discover with your teacher what is blocking you (for example, keeping your shoulders up too high), you will never achieve body symmetry," Galliano says. "When you start getting control of your body, it gives you a great degree of satisfaction."

There's an intrinsic relevance to it, says Little Rock, Ark., internist Hoyte Pyle, MD, who has been practicing Pilates for five years. Instead of working major muscle groups in isolation, he says, "Pilates works the whole body in synergy," which is how we should be moving on a daily basis.

The Roots of Pilates Exercises

The discipline was created by German-born Joseph H. Pilates a century ago. A sickly child plagued with asthma and rickets, he grew up to be obsessed about the perfect body. He sought a discipline to combine the physique of the ancient Greeks with the meditative strength of the East.

The result was a system of exercises he called "contrology," requiring intense concentration and centered on a strong abdomen, deep stretching, and focused breathing. It worked for him. Joseph Pilates became a boxer, diver, skier, gymnast, yoga devotee -- and an incredible physical testament to his method.

Pilates taught his method to wounded English soldiers during World War I, using springs he removed from their hospital beds to assist them as he developed techniques to increase their range of motion. It was from these crude devices that he developed the equipment still used today, including the reformer, Cadillac, Wunda chair, ladder barrel, and spine corrector.

Pilates emigrated to the U.S. in 1926, teaching his method first to boxers and later ballet dancers, until the rest of the world caught on.

Apparatus or Mat?

Pilates himself rarely worked with groups. Most of his work was done one on one, so each person's exercises were tailored to meet his or her needs. But he used both mat exercises and equipment with his clients.

"Pilates was developed as a system," says George. "People will get the best benefits if they utilize it as a system, doing exercises on the mat and the equipment."
"The equipment can offer more variety of movement," adds Bowen, "but it's important to have experience in the mat work as well. It's portable, for one thing."

For someone who has limitations, equipment is a great place to begin, says Galliano.

"The equipment was really designed to help people do the mat work. It supports them while they do the action," she says, which is something they can't get in a mat class.

Bottom line? If you can afford it, teachers recommend doing both mat classes and work on the equipment.

**Fusions of Pilates**

It seems like everywhere you look, familiar exercise disciplines are taking on a new life with a Pilates twist. There are fusions of Pilates with everything from yoga and swimming to ballroom dancing and boxing.

"Right now, Pilates is sort of a nice, hot word," says George. "Everybody wants to fuse Pilates with everything because it's going to help sell it."

George's perspective?

"Any movement or exercise that's done well should be beneficial to the body," she says, "but it doesn't necessarily mean you're doing Pilates."

**Pilates Is Not for Everyone**

Some 50% of adults experience back pain at some time in their lives. At any given time, 25% of adults have acute or chronic back pain, says Jupiter, Fla., physical therapist Michael L. Reed, DPT.

Pilates and other exercises that focus on the stability of the muscles that support the spine might seem like a perfect fit. But not all pain is the same, cautions Reed. Without a diagnosis for your back pain from a physician or health care professional, Pilates could do more harm than good, he says.

"You can't go to a non-medical practitioner that teaches Pilates and think that will resolve your back pain," says Reed. "That's the mistake people make."

That's not necessarily to say that Pilates won't help, says Reed, who uses Pilates in his rehabilitation studio. Movement training is a sensible way to manage pain, and non-weight-bearing exercises like Pilates can be done even by those struggling with pain, he says.
However, he warns, "it's advantageous to have a better idea what may be generating their symptoms first."

As any well-trained Pilates teacher will attest, without a proper diagnosis for the pain, even the best instructor cannot design a safe and effective exercise program.

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